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Eyes Upside Down

P. Adams Sitney on Beavers, Brakhage & Sonbert

Sunday, October 11, 2009 — California College of the Arts

P. Adams Sitney In Person

Writing and lecturing on film since the early 1960s, P. Adams Sitney stands as one of avant-garde cinema's most passionate and eloquent theorists and critics. His *Visionary Film*, published in 1974, drew deeply from fields of poetry and literature in discussing the works of Anger, Brakhage, Deren, Markopoulos and others. The tome remains a classic of critical insight on the field. His latest work, *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson*, examines the continued thread of Emersonian poetics in the American avant-garde canon and incorporates in-depth discussions of the works of many post–*Visionary Film* artists, including Abigail Child, Su Friedrich, Andrew Noren and Warren Sonbert. Appearing at Cinematheque for the first time in over a decade, Sitney will discuss his latest book, accompanied by screenings of Stan Brakhage's *Visions in Meditation #2: Mesa Verde*, Robert Beavers' *AMOR* and Warren Sonbert's *Rude Awakening*. (Steve Polta)

Rude Awakening (1976) by Warren Sonbert; 16mm, color, silent, 36 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

"The very first shot, an archer shooting an arrow offscreen, creates the expectation of a subsequent image of an arrow reaching, or missing, its goal, but it never appears. A dog tries to fetch a board that is too big for it to maneuver; a couple [...] hesitate as they walk the gangplank to a cruise ship, back up, then proceed, as if adjusting their pace to the camera; a logger cuts a tree disproportionately small for the scale of his chainsaw; acts of sport—volleyball, frisbee, a punching bag, golf—are awkwardly placed, or slightly ungraceful, or unsatisfying in the limited abilities of players to catch, return or putt.

"The final image presents a child in a sandbox, through light flares on the emulsion, throwing or pouring handfuls of sand. The ambiguous play of frustration, pleasure and bewilderment conveyed by the gesture suitably caps the whole film even though nothing has prepared us to expect that to be the last shot. At one point, Sonbert recalls the rhythmic grotesquery of Bruce Conner's *A Movie*, when shots of an accident and the removal of a victim on a stretcher lead to images of wrecking a building and a bizarre perpendicular vehicle in a soapbox derby.

"[...] If a rude awakening is a robust shock of self-recognition, the principle subject must be the filmmaker himself. In thus titling his film he acknowledges some previously unconscious aspect of his work, probably an aspect of *Carriage Trade* [1971]. What would that be? The infectious exuberance of that film had celebrated both what the filmmaker realized he could achieve and what montage itself could do, 'comparing different places, different people, different pastimes in different parts of the world, four seasons, four elements—really broad concerns."[i] However, '*Rude Wakening* continued along that line with things not working out, things not materializing, people having certain expectations, plans, input, and those dissolving.'[ii] From this I surmise that Sonbert was not only disappointed by the reception of *Carriage Trade*, the failure by both the small community of American avant-garde cinema and the larger film world to appreciate the scale and depth of his achievement, but was rudely awakened to something dark and beyond his control in his work, perhaps in filmmaking itself:

> *The people in my films aren't really basking in the sun on the beach, they're actually out there doing something. We watch ten seconds of what people do all their lives—construction men or people in a bookstore. It tends to qualify the importance—or what Sartre might call 'bad faith'—of people throwing themselves behind their own works. In a sense it's a cruel touch of just showing glimpses of what people feel is important.*"

AMOR (1980) by Robert Beavers; 16mm, color, sound, 15 minutes, print from the maker

"[…] *AMOR* is an exquisite lyric, shot in Rome ('Roma' reverses the letters of the title) and the Heckentheater (Hedge Theater) of Salzberg. The title *AMOR* renders the Greek *eros* into Latin. Beavers had represented that very divinity for [Gregory] Markopoulos in the film *Eros O Basileus* (1967) soon after they first met. Here the filmmaker declares his amor for the craft of filmmaking, for the sounds and surfaces around him, including the clothing on his body. The recurring sounds of cutting cloth, hands clapping, hammering and tapping, emphasize the associations immanent in the montage of short camera movements that bring together the making of a suit and the restoration of a building. There are close-ups of a man, presumably Beavers himself, standing in a new suit, making a series of hand movements and gestures, including clapping. A handsomely designed 10,000-lire banknote suggests the aesthetic economy of the film, in which tailoring points to editing."

Visions in Meditation #2: Mesa Verde (1989) by Stan Brakhage; 16mm, color, silent, 17 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

"In an early version of *Mindfall*, a section of his *Magellan* project, Hollis Frampton included eighteen minutes of epileptic seizures from the Library of Congress' Paper Print Collection. Waith G. Chase had made nine documentary films in 1905 to study the movement of epileptics during seizures […]. Brakhage used a fragment of the same footage […] in *Visions in Meditation #2: Mesa Verde*.

"If [*Visions in Meditation #1*] evokes a dream in which one fails to recognize people and knows little more than that winter will end, the note to the second suggests a horror story:

> *This meditation takes its visual imperatives from the occasion of Mesa Verde, which I came to see finally as a Time rather than any such solidity as Place. 'There is a terror here,' were the first words which came to mind on seeing these ruins; and for two days after, during all my photography, I was haunted by some unknown occurrence which reverberated still in these rocks and rock-structures and environs. I can no longer believe that the Indians abandoned this solid habitation because of drought, lack-of-water, somesuch. (These explanations do not, anyway, account for the fact that all memory of The Place, i.e., where it is, was eradicated from tribal memory, leaving only legend of a Time when such a place existed.) Midst the rhythms, then, of editing, I was compelled to introduce images which corroborate what the rocks said, and what the film strips seemed to say: The abandonment of Mesa Verde was an eventuality (rather than an event), was for All Time thus, and had been intrinsic from the first such human building.*[iii]

"[…] Following his interpretation of [Gertrude Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*], Brakhage has freed the image 'to its un-owned self-life within the continuities (rather than context) of the work.' So we recognize it as a cinematic invention, the product of Brakhage's mental associations and of the mechanics of the editing table. In order to come to terms with the painful mystery of the site, he juxtaposes the enigma of the anonymous epileptic, and in fusing them suggests a third source of pain and uncertainty not even visualized in the film: the failure of his first marriage. The abandonment of Mesa Verde sublimates the divorce and sale of the Brakhage home in Lump Gulch [Colorado]; the epileptic's seizure allegorizes the spiritual convulsion of that event, now elevated to a work of fate, an 'eventuality.'"

Program Notes excerpted from
Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson
by P. Adams Sitney

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[i] David Ehrenstein, "Interview with Warren Sonbert," *Film Culture 70–71* (1983), p. 186.
[ii] Ehrenstein, p. 193.
[iii] *Canyon Cinema Film/Video Catalog 7*, pp. 57–58.